

# FIFA for Women or Women for FIFA?

## The Inherent Tensions of FIFA's Women's Football Strategy

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### All About Rights

FIFA's recent turn to human rights has quickly become the centrepiece of its institutional mission and identity. In the course of four years, FIFA has commissioned an independent [human rights audit](#), amended its [Statutes](#) to include a specific commitment to respect and protect all internationally recognised human rights, adopted a [Human Rights Policy](#), established an independent [Human Rights Advisory Board](#), and introduced new [World Cup bidding requirements](#) including respect for human rights.

These initiatives are meant to contribute to the fulfilment of FIFA's broader objectives as set forth in [FIFA 2.0: The Vision for the Future](#). This institutional roadmap emphasizes that not only respecting but "championing" human rights is integral to the achievement of FIFA's three key objectives: to grow the game, to enhance the football experience, and (especially) to build a stronger institution.

### All about Equality

The debate, therefore, is no longer over whether human rights are relevant to global football governance, but rather "revolves around which human rights, for whom, and how."<sup>1</sup> Barbara Keys (ed), *The Ideals of Global Sport: From Peace to Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) at 11. In this regard, FIFA's Vision for the Future specifically and repeatedly recognizes women's equality rights in conjunction with human rights generally, expressing a bipartite commitment to the promotion of "human rights *and* gender equality", to "human rights *and* diversity", to "human rights *and* women's football" (pp 13, 24).

Moreover, FIFA's Human Rights Policy specifically identifies discrimination as one of the most "salient human rights risks" in the world of football, "both on and off the pitch." In committing to address discrimination in all its forms, FIFA places "particular emphasis on identifying and addressing differential impacts based on gender and on promoting gender equality and preventing all forms of harassment, including sexual harassment" (para 5). FIFA's existing commitment to equality and non-discrimination (as contained in article 4 of its Statutes since 2004) has thus been reframed within, and as central to, a new and broader commitment to human rights.

## All About Time

Gender discrimination is, of course, not just a risk but a longstanding and acute reality in the world of football. Such is evident in the basic facts that FIFA did not hold a women's World Cup until [1991](#) (61 years after the first men's World Cup) and did not elect a woman to its Council (formerly Executive Committee) until [2013](#) (109 years after its establishment). Today, the total [prize money](#) for the women's World Cup amounts to a mere 7.5 percent of that for the men's, and only (the statutory minimum) 6 of the 37 [FIFA Council members](#) are women. Moreover, [pay inequity](#), substandard [training](#) and [competition conditions](#), sexual [harassment](#) and [abuse](#), and an overall lack of [support](#) and [respect](#) plague women's football around the world. All this perpetuates the gender hierarchy which has long underpinned mainstream football. FIFA's newfound commitment to gender equality as a human right – as opposed to a charitable offering – is therefore long overdue and perhaps, for that reason, especially remarkable.

How does FIFA purport to address and overcome its historical and ongoing record of institutional disregard for, and discrimination against, women? Its primary weapon appears to be the recently adopted [Women's Football Strategy](#), designed to “empower the organisation to take further concrete steps to address the historic shortfalls in resources and representation, while advocating for a global stand against gender discrimination through playing football” (p 4). This may seem an ambitious compound goal, seeking to advance gender equality within FIFA, football and beyond. But what promise does the Women's Football Strategy actually hold in this regard?

## All About its Business

A first hint is found in the fact that the Strategy, like championing human rights generally, is specifically designed to “help fulfil FIFA 2.0, the organization's overall strategic roadmap” (p 2) and is therefore framed by the same three key objectives: to grow participation, to enhance commercial value, and to strengthen regulatory foundations. In other words, gender equality is positioned in service of FIFA's broader institutional goals.

In the oft-repeated words of its [President](#), “FIFA's main purpose is – and must be – to promote football.” We must therefore ask: What becomes of a commitment to gender equality when it is made subservient to the preservation and promotion of a monopolistic industry with a long history of gender discrimination? A brief examination of each objective of the Women's Football Strategy, and the strategies and tactics designed to achieve them, illuminates three significant tensions in this regard.

### **(1) To grow women's participation – and FIFA's regulatory power**

The first objective of the Strategy is focused on increasing the number of girls and women who participate in football – as players, coaches and referees. Pathways

to participation are to be created in the form of school football programs, more and higher-quality leagues, elite football academies, and coaching and refereeing training programs.

Creating more opportunities for women to participate in football is a good thing by all accounts; establishing all such opportunities under the regulatory control of FIFA may not be. Indeed, this objective raises a central question for any critical feminist analysis of sport: whether the entry of those previously excluded or marginalized creates a culture of resistance or a culture of assimilation – “a powerful expression of these women’s progress or a form of manipulation.”<sup>2)</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves, “Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?” in Richard Giulianotti (ed), *Sport and Modern Social Theorists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) at 198. This tension may be of a particular nature and severity for certain groups of women, such as those from the Global South, given that all [FIFA’s founding members](#) (besides Switzerland) were European colonial powers, which largely continue to dominate the sport both on and off the pitch.

FIFA’s Women’s Football Strategy does not disguise the fact that the primary purpose of facilitating women’s participation in football is to further expand the reach of FIFA’s regulatory power: “increasing the level of female participation in football is central to the organisation’s ability to reach the goals and objectives outlined in FIFA 2.0: The Vision for the Future” (p 6). The extent to which FIFA can achieve such expansion – by bringing more people in more countries under its authority and enforcing upon them more rules in more detail – is limited if it disregards women. FIFA therefore has much to gain in terms of power and prestige by bringing women – who have been [playing and otherwise pioneering football since before FIFA existed](#) – under its umbrella, thereby warding off regulatory competition.

Stepping under FIFA’s umbrella requires surrendering to the controlling features of organized sport, the rules of which were primarily developed by men for the men’s game. The Women’s Football Strategy does, however, also promise to unleash some of sport’s emancipatory potential. For instance, it seeks to facilitate not only the (quantitative) participation of women and girls but also their (qualitative) ability to “add unique dimensions to the game.” Further, it commits FIFA to “supporting its member associations in achieving *their own* women’s football objectives” rather than simply imposing one universal view in this regard (p 6). In principle then, women from around the world are not to be limited to entering and assimilating into a pre-established game and industry, but rather given space to mould it to suit their identities and interests.

Given FIFA’s only very recent (and tentative) embrace of women’s football, we are early in the process of witnessing the extent to which a new phase of football, under the auspices of FIFA, “offers women discursive tools to oppose oppressive power relations” or rather “enmeshes them in normalizing discourses that limit their vision of who and what they can be.”<sup>3)</sup> *Ibid* at 202. We must therefore pay close attention to how this tension plays out in the implementation of FIFA’s Women’s Football Strategy and other initiatives purported to advance gender equality. Using girls and women to grow the game will be anti-feminist if it simply brings more of them into

a sport premised on masculine (and other intersecting forms of) superiority and dominance. While women's participation challenges this premise, overturning it will require active cooperation from those who have long dominated FIFA football.

## **(2) To enhance women's football – and FIFA's commercial value**

The Women's Football Strategy asserts that FIFA's ability to develop the women's game "depends upon its effectiveness to commercialise" and to create "new revenue streams" from women's competitions and events (p 7). This second objective seems to suggest that FIFA cannot develop the women's game without additional funds – a strange assertion from an organization reporting [revenue](#), from its most recent four-year cycle, of over 6.4 billion US dollars. According to that report, "FIFA's financial position is extremely healthy, sustainable and strong with a substantial cash base and sufficient reserves ensuring future investments in football development" (pp 14, 22). It would therefore be more accurate to say that FIFA *will* not grow the women's game unless it is (immediately) economically advantageous for it to do so.

In this regard, it is important to note that FIFA is *not* a for-profit corporation, but rather an association with a "non-commercial purpose" under [Swiss law](#). It may therefore only conduct commercial operations "in pursuit of its objects" which include "to promote the development of women's football" in accordance with the constitutional principles of non-discrimination and gender equality (FIFA Statutes, articles 2-3). That FIFA, for example, spends [over twenty times more](#) on the men's World Cup than on the women's World Cup not only contravenes these legal parameters but highlights another tension in its Women's Football Strategy – between enhancing the women's game for its own sake versus for the sake of FIFA's overall profitability. Moreover, this tension is premised on flawed and discriminatory economic sense: The men's game has flourished financially because FIFA has aggressively marketed and invested in it over many decades. When it comes to the women's game, however, FIFA takes a much more [cautious and uncommitted](#) approach, which ignores that its lower revenues from the women's game are a result of, not a justification for, gender discrimination. The Women's Football Strategy does little to change this disingenuous and circular position; gender equality remains contingent on, and secondary to, FIFA's own economic gain.

Further, FIFA's tactics for developing a "women's commercial program" include redesigning the ticketing model to integrate the "family aspect" of the women's game (p 15), which presumably refers to the (actual and desired) attendance of women and children as fans. Underlying this tactic is implicit recognition of the aggressive – and [frequently racist](#), [sexist](#), [homophobic](#), [islamophobic](#) and [antisemitic](#) – behaviour of (mostly) male fans at men's football matches. FIFA's Women's Football Strategy does not address, however, the ways in which inequality is embedded in the men's game. Rather, it economizes morality by framing moral concerns – such as gender equality and family-friendliness – "from *within* the instrumental rationality of capitalist markets."<sup>4</sup> Ronen Shamir, "The Age of Responsibilization: On Market-Embedded Morality" (2008) 37:1 *Economy and Society* 1 at 3. That is, FIFA does not treat human rights and gender equality as external forces bearing on its product (football)

but rather distributes them as a commodities, and thus only insofar as they are compatible with its profitability.

This incremental and contingent approach is already being rejected by some female footballers. For instance, the [#OurGoalsNow](#) campaign demands prize money for the women's World Cup substantively equal to that for the men's World Cup. The tension between what's best for the women's game and what's best for FIFA therefore remains in flux and must be carefully monitored to ensure the former isn't merely a means to the latter.

### **(3) To build the regulatory foundations of women's football – and improve FIFA's reputation**

The third and final objective of FIFA's Women's Football Strategy is to “build upon the current foundations to effectively govern and regulate a more sophisticated women's football ecosystem,” including by bringing more women into the upper ranks of governance (p 8). There is an obvious risk, however, in building upon regulatory foundations that have long supported a shocking level of [corruption](#) and cartelization.

Why should women want to be part of such an institution and what is their involvement meant to achieve? For one, according to the Strategy, more women in leadership means the interests of women will be better represented in FIFA's decision-making: “The long-standing lack of women in positions of responsibility in the football community means there have been limited voices to advocate for change” (p 4). This is a clear admission that FIFA's male-dominated leadership has proven unable or unwilling to advocate for institutional developments to benefit (or at least not disadvantage) women. FIFA's Strategy, however, does nothing to overturn men's overwhelming majority power. Rather, it sets conservative goals for the composition of its national member associations' executive committees (at least *one* woman and one seat dedicated to representing women's interests – on the assumption that the rest of the seats will be filled by men representing men's interests), leaving in place the composition of its own Council: 31 men and 6 women. As new and minoritized members of the organization, women remain at risk of tokenization and exclusion from FIFA's longstanding boys' club, the members of which have the most institutional power – but the least will – to make change.

Nevertheless, FIFA seems to foresee that bringing more women into positions of leadership will also help protect the “integrity” of football (pp 8,12), which seems to imply, at least in part, curbing corruption. Perhaps female leaders are generally less corrupt in comparison to their male counterparts (a very low bar indeed), whether by virtue of their gender or their newness to the institution. We know, however, that corruption is not just an individual problem, but an institutionalized one; and there is no indication that FIFA has corrected its institutional defects in this regard. In fact, it recently introduced anti-whistleblower provisions into its [Code of Ethics](#) which forbid members of the football family from “making any public statements of a defamatory nature towards FIFA and/or towards any other person bound by this code in the context of FIFA events.”

The few women allowed into FIFA's inner circle are therefore both formally and informally discouraged from speaking out against gender discrimination and corruption (which is likely to disproportionately hurt women's football programs) – not to mention sexual harassment and abuse, which attracts no specific mention in the Women's Football Strategy. This oversight is particularly significant given the widely known connection between sexual harassment and abuse and unequal/gendered power relations. While select women may directly benefit from the Strategy's goal to diversify its leadership, it is far from clear that they will be able to exercise autonomy in these positions, let alone to do so on behalf of women more broadly.

In short, the Strategy seems to rely on women to either fix FIFA's regulatory failures or to serve as a gloss over such failures – an unreasonable burden or an invitation to fail along with the rest of FIFA's leadership. We should be sceptical about FIFA's strategy to apply "more regulatory strength" over women's football (p 17) while relying on a handful of women in leadership positions, and little else, to ensure this regulatory strength is not used for corrupt or discriminatory purposes. Staffing corrupt and oppressive institutions with women ensures only that they will share an equal role in perpetuating these practices.

## All About Social Good?

Associating itself with positive social movements "with an eye toward countering corruption scandals and the taint of mammoth commercialism" is a longstanding strategy of FIFA.<sup>5)</sup> Keys, *supra* note 1 at 5-6. What's new is its specific and joint reference to human rights, and gender equality in particular, as among the primary means to its institutional goals. As public shaming has made FIFA susceptible to pressure from human rights and women's organizations, it has also become "increasingly savvy about the benefits of coopting rather than resisting these forces."<sup>6)</sup> *Ibid* at 218-219. Indeed, FIFA's Women's Football Strategy repeatedly emphasizes football's "positive social impact on women and girls all around the world" (pp 18-19, 14-15). But FIFA does not pursue such impacts for their own sake; rather, its Strategy seeks to "leverage the empowerment of women and the societal benefits of football" to achieve the institution's broader objectives (p 2). What's good for society and what's good for FIFA are wedded in a purported mutually beneficial relationship – but the latter takes precedence.

In summary, FIFA will back women if, and only if, women back FIFA – and do so publicly. This suggests that FIFA's human rights and gender equality rhetoric is primarily a marketing strategy, by which these normative commitments are pursued only insofar as they provide FIFA with greater regulatory power and prestige, substantial financial gain, and a better reputation for good governance. This approach stops far short of granting women space to define the sport and the institution on their own terms. Nonetheless, FIFA has given an inch and it should not be surprised if women and others interested in gender equal football now seek to take a long overdue mile. Look no further than France 2019 for the first strides.

## References

- 1. Barbara Keys (ed), *The Ideals of Global Sport: From Peace to Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) at 11.
  - 2. Jennifer Hargreaves, "Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?" in Richard Giulianotti (ed), *Sport and Modern Social Theorists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) at 198.
  - 3. *Ibid* at 202.
  - 4. Ronen Shamir, "The Age of Responsibilization: On Market-Embedded Morality" (2008) 37:1 *Economy and Society* 1 at 3.
  - 5. Keys, *supra* note 1 at 5-6.
  - 6. *Ibid* at 218-219.
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